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HARNESSING THE APOCALYPTIC BEAST

by

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Who yoked the spirited horses to winds and storm clouds?
Zarathustra, *Yasna* 44



The Four Riders of the Apocalypse
Albrecht Dürer

woodcut, 1497-1498

Staatliche Kunsthalle
Karlsruhe, Germany

Few symbols have so haunted our imagination as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Described as white, red, black and pale, said to symbolize plague, war, famine and death, and linked to the opening of the first four of the Seven Seals, they are usually interpreted by Christians as signs that the Last Day is near. They have inspired poems, songs, stories, paintings and films, not to mention underground comics, pulp literature and Internet blogs. Yet these figures, though picturesque, have nothing to do with actual horses and riders.

Horses and horsemen, the Throne and Chariot, are aspects of one and the same thing. *The Revelation's* depiction of the Divine Throne borrows from the classical Hebrew prophets, and in many details resembles *Ezekiel*, *Isaiah* and *Daniel*, as well as the books of *Enoch*.

Upon the throne sat one who looked like precious stones of jasper and sardius. The throne was like an emerald encircled by a rainbow, ... and out of it came lightning, thunder and voices. Directly in front of the throne seven lamps of fire were burning, ... and stretching before it was a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

Near the throne, all round it, were four animals, full of eyes before and behind. The first was like a lion; the second was like a calf; the third animal had a man's face; and the fourth was like a flying eagle. The four animals each had six wings; and all round and within were full of eyes ...

Rev. 4:3-8

This imagery reflects an established tradition. The prophets vary in style, their verses take aim at different person-ages and changing situations, but they draw from the same well, and build upon one foundation: namely, the Divine Throne-Chariot, the horses and horsemen. Other repeated elements include the Tree of Life, the Fount of Living Waters, and the House of Heaven which is made of crystal.

The prophetic guild did not leave such weighty matters up to experimentalism and individual invention. The prophet's mantle was handed down to his apprentice, along with forms and techniques of their art, so that the inner meaning of the symbolism was preserved from generation to generation, and the vision remained intact.

In *Ezekiel*, the prophet sees a whirlwind or storm coming out of the north, amid which appear the same four animals as in *The Revelation*, but in a different order: man, lion, ox and eagle. (These bestial symbols, by the way, refer to the four fixed signs of the Zodiac — Aquarius, Leo, Taurus and Scorpio. Only the eagle looks out-of-place; but as it turns out, Aquilo, the Eagle, a minor constellation, is a *pantalon* of Scorpio.)

Ezekiel's vision is known in esoteric Judaism as *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, the Work of the Chariot. The twelfth-century scholar Moses Maimonides comments at length on its symbolism; his [*Guide for the Perplexed*](#) explains *merkabah* as “the collective noun denoting animals used for riding ... which in *Ezekiel* means four ‘horses.’ ”

Merkabah, a throne or chariot, and *rakab*, to ride, share the root RKB. Thus “the literal sense of the words [is that] ... the four animals (or beasts) carry the Throne of Glory ...” (In other mythologies, the Throne-Chariot — pictured as Ursa Major, the Seven Stars, better known to us as the Big Dipper — was drawn by these same “horses.”) Then Maimonides makes a deceptively bland statement, which turns out to be highly significant.

The term *rakab*, “to ride,” is a synonym. In its primary signification it is applied to man's riding on an animal, in the usual way; e.g., “Now he was riding [*rokeb*] upon his ass” (*Numbers* 22:22). It has then been figuratively used to denote “dominion over a thing”; because the rider governs and rules the animal he rides upon ...

Numbers chapter 22 tells the story of the pagan prophet Balaam and his talking donkey. By coincidence — or maybe not — *The Revelation* also mentions those who follow “doctrines of Balaam.”

Balaam’s earlier incarnation in the Jewish Scriptures is nowadays avoided by sober thinkers, probably because it sounds too much like a folk tale, not Holy Writ. Before the late eighteenth century, the story might add a touch of whimsy to sermons, rather than a conundrum to explain. Even so perceptive a scholar as Elaine Pagels, in her recent book on *The Revelation*, misses or shuns this point. She quotes the verses which refer to Balaam:

I have a few things against you. There are some among you who hold doctrines of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat meat that was sacrificed to idols, and to engage in fornication. So have you also those holding the teaching of the Nikolaitans — things which I hate. Rev. 2:14-15

But she says that it refers to a false teacher contemporary with early Christians, who is “derisively” named after the Biblical “evil prophet.” She nowhere mentions *Numbers*, nor this supernatural incident of an animal that talks.

To put things in perspective: No hard evidence has ever been found to show that either King David or King Solomon existed; Balaam, however, may have been a real, historical human being. In 1967, at Deir ‘Alla, Jordan, Dutch archaeologists discovered a painted inscription of [verses attributed to Balaam, son of Be’or](#), dated to about 800 BCE. Though written in an obscure local dialect, the style shows distinct similarities to the Hebrew prophets.

An ancient heresy lies buried in the lore and legends of the Apocalypse. What are those “doctrines of Balaam,” and why were they suppressed? The confusion endemic in this field (apocalyptic literature in general, *The Revelation* in particular) could hardly be an organized conspiracy; sworn enemies would have had to cooperate over many centuries, implying vows of silence, gruesome blood oaths, passwords, special handshakes, and other trappings of cloak-and-daggerism. Not that I doubt the existence of secret societies; but could such knowledge really have been concealed for over two thousand years?

More likely is that the Apocalypse’s connection to the *Merkabah* was forgotten. Root meanings of Hebrew terms were lost by translation into non-Semitic languages. As Christianity spread, further translations from Greek into other languages compounded this misunderstanding, and the Chariot came to be imagined as a machine instead of horses. We cannot say if the Apocalypse was regarded as forbidden knowledge by early Christians; in Judaism, though, the Work of the Chariot was definitely taboo, and chaos helped to conceal the secret.

The [Talmud](#) records rabbinical opinions on the subject. First lines of chapters might be given to the head of a court, but “*only* if his heart is anxious in him.” Students must be “reverential and not given to levity.” Another authority rules that the *Merkabah* might be taught only to such persons as are listed in *Isaiah* 3:3 —

*The leader of fifty, the exalted one,
the privy counsellor, the adept craftsman,
and the cunning charmer.*

Others forbade it altogether as part of the Oral Law, and *Ezekiel*’s description of the Chariot was banned from the liturgy in many synagogues. A notorious *Mishnah* warns against idle curiosity on the matter:

... the Work of the Chariot may not be expounded in the presence of even one person alone, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge. Whoever speculates upon four things — a pity for him! — he is like one who was never born! — namely: what is above, beneath, before, and after. *Hagigah* 13a

Such prohibitions effectively shut the door on the *Merkabah*, since it could be discussed only among those who already knew what it meant. This knowledge was guarded because it touches on harmful magical practices; but more, because the Chariot and Apocalypse are clues leading to the Prime Matter of spiritual alchemy.

BALAAM AND THE ANGEL

illustration from the Psalter of King Louis IX of France
thirteenth century (1258-1270)
Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris)



In *Numbers*, King Balak of Moab fears making war against Israel; so he offers money to Balaam to come and curse the Israelites, in order to give the Moabites an advantage. Yahweh warns Balaam not to go, but the prophet does not listen, and starts out on the journey. Yahweh gets angry with Balaam, and sends an angel to stop him.

Balaam cannot see Yahweh's angel, who is invisible, but his donkey sees it. Twice the angel blocks his way, holding a drawn sword, and ready to kill Balaam; but both times Balaam's ass sees the angel and turns off the path, so Balaam beats the ass, to get her back onto the way. A third time the angel stands in Balaam's way. There is no space to left or right, so the ass falls down under him, and Balaam beats his ass again with his staff.

Then, in this unique Biblical passage, Yahweh opens the donkey's mouth, and she asks Balaam: "What have I done, that you strike me three times?" Balaam is furious, and answers, "You mock me! I wish I had a sword to kill you now." But the animal reasons with him, "Am I not your ass? Haven't you always ridden me, ever since I was yours, up unto this day? Did I ever disobey you, that you should beat me now?" And Balaam admits that, no, the ass has never given him problems. Then Balaam's eyes are opened. He sees the angel standing there with a sword; so Balaam bows down, his face to the ground. Now the angel tells Balaam that the ass saved him; otherwise Balaam would have been killed, and the ass spared. Then Balaam repents, and goes back the way he came.

Balaam's story exemplifies primitive *Merkabah* tradition. Chariot symbolism evolves, becomes more sophisticated; the two strands divide, are again entwined; but the essential teaching stays the same. Horse and rider here represent body and soul: our body's innate wisdom rebels (as psychosomatic illness) against wrong-headed ideas.

Christians charged Balaam with avarice (2 *Peter* 2:15). Perhaps this is a faded hint of alchemy? Crucial symbols in primitive *Merkabah* tradition are the bridle, harness and reins; and, in more developed Chariot teachings, the yoke. This idea, applied to people, transforms the yoke of subjection or servitude into a discipline or spiritual bond. In *Matthew* 11:29-30, for example, Jesus tells his disciples, "Take my yoke upon you ... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." We speak figuratively of the yoke of marriage; note also the similarity of the words *bride* and *bridle*. And the well-known Sanskrit term *yoga*, meaning union, is etymologically related to *yoke* in English; which comes close to the original meaning of the word *religion* itself — usually derived from a Latin root denoting a bond. All these terms refer to a spiritual bond between separate beings: divine and human, human and animal, or between two persons.

Gurdjieff taught that we are not born with immortality, but can acquire it. The three conventional paths to immortality (the ways of fakir, monk and yogi) aim to conquer body, emotions and mind. A fakir stands in the same position for months, gradually attaining mastery over the body. However, he becomes rigid like a statue; his disciples carry him to the river and wash him like an inanimate object. Though he has an indomitable will, he cannot control his emotions, and is often uneducated. The monk follows an equally severe discipline, using meditation, contemplation and renunciation to subjugate the emotions. The monk achieves inner peace, but typically neglects the physical body; and does not appreciate what might be accomplished with his imperturbable calmness. The yogi tries to reach the goal by mental discipline alone, but ends up a sort of spiritualistic geek. He possesses vast knowledge; however, he is physically undisciplined and emotionally immature. These three ways, furthermore, require absolute withdrawal from the world — cutting off family, friends and relationships — ultimately alienating one from ordinary life, business and other secular pursuits.

Then Gurdjieff points to a Fourth Way, in which he says that one works simultaneously on all these aspects — the physical, emotional and mental “bodies” — at last becoming master of oneself. The last step is to bring these three aspects of one’s being under control of the Will. And here, Gurdjieff uses a familiar figure to illustrate his discipline — the Chariot. “In the terminology of certain Eastern teachings the first body is the ‘carriage’ (body), the second body is the ‘horse’ (feelings, desires), the third the ‘driver’ (mind), and the fourth the ‘master’ (I, consciousness, will).” Gurdjieff calls this “the way of the sly man.” Nobody knows how he came by his knowledge; maybe he got it from some old books, maybe he stole it. It does not matter how. What matters is that he now possesses a strange power unknown to most people. Gurdjieff, in his student [Ouspensky’s account](#), then goes on to talk about alchemy.

Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, relates a philosophical myth told his by teacher Socrates. The nature of the soul is compared to “a pair of winged horses and a charioteer.” One horse is a thoroughbred, well-trained and easy to manage; the other is an ugly brute, which cannot be tamed or controlled. The vicious horse invariably misleads the noble horse, and the driver, too, and drags them all into destruction. In *Phaedo*, another of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates teaches that the soul needs to purge itself of unwholesome bodily pleasures if it is to attain to eternal life with the gods; and “those who have thoughtlessly given themselves over to gluttony and violence and drunkenness are likely to be clothed in the shapes of asses and similar beasts.”

Myths, legends, folktales and songs are full of magic flying horses, and stupid, contrary asses. The Scottish ballad of [Thomas the Rhymer](#) (another real person, by the way) comes to mind: True Thomas flies away with the Queen of Heaven on a “horse” to the Otherworld; they ride over a sea of blood for forty days and nights, and he returns a poet and prophet. Likewise, in the Arabian Nights tale of the Enchanted Horse, a prince who flies off to a faraway kingdom on a mechanical magic horse, built by an evil wizard, to woo a princess in her private chamber. Their parents try to keep them apart; but magic invariably alters the ordinary course of events whenever true love is at stake, so after many trials they are united, and live happily ever after.

The Prophet Muhammad, on his [Night Journey](#), rides the same vehicle of the spirit which transported the prophets Elijah and Enoch. (This is a matter of some controversy within Islam, though many early writers testify to the legend.) The angel Gabriel washes the Prophet’s heart in the waters of Zamzam, then brings him *al-Burāq* (whose name means both lightning and grace), a white heavenly creature, smaller than a mule, bigger than a donkey. Pegasus, in Greek myth, performs a similar function for the hero Bellerophon.

Another Greek myth often cited by the alchemists is [the fifth labor of Hercules](#) (to clean the Augean stables in a day): there again is the tenuous connection to animals used for riding. It is doubtful whether this myth was originally intended to illustrate alchemical principles; but writers on alchemy believed so. Hercules was promised immortality upon completion of the whole series of labors, which no doubt suggested the connection.

Mrs. Atwood, in her [Suggestive Inquiry](#), identifies the Work of the Chariot with alchemical pursuits; and cites Hercules’ fifth labor as advising us to purify our spiritual vehicle before undertaking the Great Work. She also refers to another prophetic vision in *Ezekiel* chapter 8: “a form like a man” with “fiery loins,” whose upper body resembled “gleaming bronze” (*cf. Rev. 1:13-16*); who reveals what people “do in darkness, every one in his chamber of images.” Our “vehicle” dwells in the Unconscious (our dreams, nightmares, wishes, fantasies); that is, in the visual imagination, that rare power peculiar to creative persons — artists, physicists, poets and prophets.

An odd confirmation of this mystery, illustrating its malignant potential, comes from the story of Abelard and Heloise. These star-crossed lovers are nearly as famous as Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Isolde. In the cheap romance-novel version, Abelard was a monk, and Heloise a nun, and he violated his vows of celibacy to be with her. In fact, however, this was not the case at all. Abelard was a secular cleric; although held to a high degree of moral integrity, he was not bound to be celibate. By the standards of the twelfth century, Abelard's only moral failing was to seduce his student — a breach of trust against his host, her uncle, who had engaged Abelard as the girl's tutor. True, he was aged forty, and she was only seventeen, but such matches were not uncommon; moreover, at seventeen, she (by medieval standards) was practically an old maid.

If we are to believe Abelard's account, he is the top scholar of his day. So many students attend his lectures, and make him a tidy profit, that other professors burn with envy. Then he tries his hand at theology; and, though unversed in such matters, he scores more successes and gets more enemies. His incessant boastfulness makes for a few tiresome passages; one wonders if his *Historia calamitatum* is the artless autobiography that he claims it to be. He assures us that he was a model of chastity, for example, right up until he met Heloise; but, having at last succumbed to temptations of the flesh, he, though unversed in such matters, turns out to be a total stud.

Abelard and Heloise flout convention, and live like rock stars. He renounces philosophy for a while, and becomes a poet and songwriter. None of his verses survive (unless perhaps anonymously), but he claims that they were wildly popular. When caught in the act, they keep right on fornicating without shame in full view of everybody. She gets pregnant, so he sends her off somewhere safe to wait out her term; she gives birth, and names their son Astrolabe. But her family misinterpret his motives. "Thus it came to pass," Abelard writes, "that while I was utterly absorbed in pride and sensuality, divine grace, the cure for both diseases, was forced upon me." Believing that he has put her away to protect his academic reputation, some of her relatives decide to teach the learned professor a lesson; in the dead of night, they break into his lodgings and brutally castrate him.

Most readers miss one important detail, though. Abelard says that his misfortunes started when he accepted a challenge to interpret any passage of Scripture put to him. Not surprisingly, his opponents pick "that most obscure prophecy of Ezekiel" — the Chariot passage. In the context, this amounts almost to a confession that he used black magic to seduce Heloise. And it does fit with the boastful tone that permeates his narrative. *Historia*, in the old sense, is a story, not a history, not a record of plain facts, and maybe is better read as a cautionary tale.

They were real people, though. Later he founds the Convent of the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit as "Consoler"), and installs Heloise as its head. They exchange many letters throughout their lives. She — though seduced by a magician and insufferable braggart — does not seem to hold a grudge against him; and declares in one of her letters that she would rather be known as his whore, than to be made a queen by any of the kings of Europe.

If this sounds far-fetched ... a 1999 film, *Being John Malkovich*, appears to connect the dots. Marionettes, not the Chariot, symbolize binding; Abelard and Heloise appear twice, at the beginning and end. A man (played by John Cusack) discovers a hidden portal leading into John Malkovich's brain, then uses this knowledge to control him. Boundaries of fact and fiction are blurred, too, since the actor (credited as John Horatio Malkovich) plays his parallel-reality quasi-self. (His actual middle name is Gavin.) This suggests Shakespeare's lines, from *Hamlet*:

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy....*

Whether we truly know, or only believe that we know, the secret of alchemy, it is bad manners to talk about what cannot be expressed. However, talk about it we must, if only to correct certain persistent and widespread misunderstandings. And this is legitimate; for even some who do not possess the whole Art may still comprehend enough, through constant study and testing, to be able to say definitively what it is not.

It is not (for instance) a get-rich-quick scheme; nor pseudo-science, nor a perversion of religion and philosophy, nor delusion, nor mental illness. Yet, what it *is*, is practically impossible to describe or define, because it involves us in paradox and contradiction. Just to think about it is awkward, like trying to perform an unaccustomed, delicate operation — say, cutting one's own hair — by using a mirror. When we ought to move to the right, we move left, and unless we are extremely careful, we make things worse than before.

The problem of alchemy is, in a way, its own solution. We are ourselves the vehicle, the vessel, both subject and observer of the experiment, the agent of transmutation, and the end result of the process; indeed, we are the process itself. We are the lead, and (with Divine grace and a little luck) we may in the end become gold. We are our own proof — the *only* proof — of success or failure.

The first, most important step in the alchemical process is to discover, and lay hold of, the Prime Matter. Now, this mysterious substance can never be identified as just *this* or *that*. This One Thing has no “other.” It is neither reducible to any single thing, nor a composite of many things, nor does it equal everything put together; but from it, all things may be created. If it cannot be found in one's own home, then it will never be discovered. Children play in the street with it. Though priceless, it is often discarded as worthless, especially by the wealthy. The poor often possess more of it than the rich. And without it, one can never reach the ultimate destination.

What it *is*, exactly, nobody can say; it can only be indicated by indirect means. Alchemical authors speak of “binding” and “torturing,” to force the Prime Matter, after numerous transformations, to reveal itself in its true state. The very means by which we can be manipulated, bewitched or fascinated — through our physical, emotional and mental “bodies” — is, by a sort of reverse engineering, the key to the occult treasury. By consciously planting seed-images deep within the Unconscious, rather than passively accepting false ideas sown by others, we are able, by stages, to gain control over different aspects of our being, and finally, it is said, to create the Diamond Vehicle [*vajrayana*] — immortal, indestructible, impervious to harmful influences — and acquire [the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel](#) from the [Dragon Kings](#). Or, to use the more familiar Western terminology: we make [the Philosopher's Stone](#).